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ABSTRACT

The field of communication seems to ignore how religious commitment informs communication practices. According to the research of B. A. Kosmin and S. P. Lachman, religion "counts in American society." Still, a survey of publications showed that very few scholars consider religion an important topic for communication research. Over the entirety of its publication (17 years), the "Journal of Communication and Religion" has published only a handful of articles (12) concerning the relationship between communication and religion. Those researchers who have devoted their energies to issues concerning religion have demonstrated the richness of the field. They have found, for instance, that the higher an individual's religious commitment, the greater the likelihood of disclosing personal information; or that a view of God as benevolent is negatively correlated with loneliness, while a view of God as wrathful is positively correlated with loneliness. One of the difficulties facing the research of religion is how to define and measure it. Such a measure might take into account: (1) the subject's affiliation; (2) the subject's concept of God; and (3) the subject's understanding of behavioral injunctions. The researcher might look into the following areas for relationships between religion and communication: receptivity to public persuasive messages; patterns of self-disclosure; and the way a person creates a life story. (Contains 34 references.) (TB)

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The Culture of Disbelief: Religious Commitment as a Neglected Variable in Social Science Research

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In *The Culture of Disbelief*, Carter (1993) notes that

> One good way to end a conversation--or start an argument--is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God's will. In the unlikely event that anyone hangs around to talk with you about it, the chances are that you will be challenged on the ground that you are intent on imposing your religious beliefs on other people. And in contemporary political and legal culture, nothing is worse. (p. 23)

The central point of Carter's argument is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to refer to one's religion as a basis for argument, especially in the public arena. If one is religious, one ought to keep that to oneself. Acting with respect to one's religious views, particularly if that action will affect others, has become a matter of imposition. Our society is one built on tolerance and reason, and "the message is that people who take their religion seriously, who rely on their understanding of God for motive force in their public and political personalities--well, they're scary people" (p. 24).

Why it should be "scary" that people reveal religious motives for acting in situations is puzzling. Few of us would fault a person who acts from "humane" reasons. And recent theories in the field of communication are certainly written with identifiable axiological frameworks. At the risk of oversimplification, Fisher's (1989) idea of narrative, for example, assumes that all but the mentally disabled are capable of basic rationality (p. 67), and that the basis for judging any story (regardless of the expertise of the person "telling" it) is its narrative coherence and fidelity. And Pearce's (1989) treatise claims that social eloquence occurs where people "achieve coordination among incommensurate social realities without denying their differences" (p. 171). As the Christian Right is fond of pointing out, it is not the case that those who drive the dialogue are operating in a value-free environment, but that their values are so taken-for-granted that they fail to notice the presence of distinct presuppositions about humanity and "right actions." It is not surprising, therefore, that people who take their religion seriously should be frustrated by the refusal of others to allow them to introduce their sometimes alternative values into the debate as they search for appropriate responses to situations.

The field of communication seems no less open to understanding how and why people use their religious commitment as a basis for thinking, talking, and acting in public or even private life. Although the semi-annual *Journal of Religion and Communication* exists on the periphery of our field, mainstream treatments of religious communication are largely confined to infrequent examinations of religious broadcasting and televangelism. Reasons for examining televangelism seem obvious--beleaguered by scandal and financial misdeeds, they are a prime example of religion at its worst. It is more difficult, I believe, to discover how something works well than to discover how something fails. Outside the concept of religious communication, consider, for example, the difference in the amount of research conducted on communication apprehension as opposed to the amount of research

conducted on communication satisfaction. We know a great deal about communication situations that frighten people, but we know considerably less about those things that create satisfaction.

This paper argues the importance of examining religious commitment as an explanative factor in communication processes. Religious commitment is defined broadly to encompass one's views of the divine, membership in religious groups, and involvement in one's attitudes and membership. In order to make this argument, the importance of religious commitment is established through a discussion of the religious affiliations of Americans. Next, the frequency of research concerning religious communication is examined. Third, a representative review of research concerning the impact of religious affiliation, commitment, and attitudes on other social variables is presented. Finally, I will explore some ways in which religious commitment might be measured, and the ways in which it might impact various communication processes.

Is Religion Actually Important to Most Americans?

Kosmin and Lachman (1993) report a 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification conducted by the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Out of 113, 723 respondents, the breakdown according to religion was:

Catholic	26.2	
Baptist	19.4	
Methodist	8.0	
Lutheran	5.2	
Various Christian Denominations	10.5	
"Christian" (no denomination given)	4.6	
"Protestant" (no denomination given)	9.8	
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.8	
Mormon	1.4	
Jewish	1.8	
Buddhist	0.2	
Hindu	0.2	
Other	1.4	
Agnostic	0.7	
Refused	2.3	
None	7.5	**Total Christian = 86.2%**

The researchers report a 95% confidence level, with an error rate of ±.2%. While some questions were raised by Ellwood and Miller (1992) concerning the labels used to describe religious affiliation in their study, Kosmin and Lachman (1992) defended the use of labels supplied by the participants in the study rather than imposed by the researchers. However one argues the labels, the majority of people surveyed reported an affiliation with some form of Christianity--a mainstream, traditional religion. The authors argue that

> Religion counts in American society. It is linked to the volunteerism and individualism that was recognized by Alexis de Tocqueville over 150 years ago. . . .Religion in American society plays a number of different roles, from organizing social authority to providing a sense of

> community and group solidarity. . . .One cannot truly understand America without appreciating the various and diverse roles in which religion influences and shapes our shared lives. (p. 14)

One can argue, with sound evidence, that spirituality matters to most Americans, and that most Americans consider themselves to be affiliated with some form of organized religion. However, whether that affiliation is strong or weak, and the effect it has on communication behavior, remains to be established. In many cases, such affiliation may take the form of "Sheilaism"--a kind of private, religious individualism characterized by those

> who follow their 'own little voice' rather than institutional authorities on religious and moral matters. So understood and practiced, religion is a deeply personal concern which in its most radical expression does not involve communal loyalties. It does involve belief in God, although just what imageries and attributes of the divine are invoked is not clear. The locus of moral and religious decision making lies within an autonomous self, dislodged from any meaningful social and institutional context. (Greer and Roof, 1992, 346-347)

In such cases, the effect of religious commitment on communication behavior may be negligible, or may be difficult to ascertain because it is obscured by other individual characteristics.

Not only may traditional religious loyalties be complicated by a tendency toward individualistic interpretation of doctrine, but they may also be complicated by multiple affiliations. Feher (1992), for example, reports that 25% of the U.S. population also believes in astrology and read astrology columns regularly. Thus, a person's religious beliefs may be augmented by beliefs outside of traditional religious sources.

However people describe their religious affiliations, it seems apparent that such affiliations are important enough for many to label themselves as religious in one way or another, and those religious affiliations would appear to be clustered around traditional religious labels. Discovering how such affiliations affect behavior should be useful to communication researchers, not only in the study of public argument, but also in areas that deal with less public arena of behavior, such as interpersonal influence, romantic communication, or conflict.

The Frequency of Research in Communication on Religious Influences

One might think that the apparent ubiquity of religion in the lives of Americans would lead researchers to question how it affects their public and private communication. The infrequency of research addressing such questions, however, would suggest a lack of interest within our field.

In order to determine what questions were being examined in the field of communication, I examined listings in *Communication Abstracts* under various headings related to religion and communication. Five and 1/3 years (1990 - 1994, plus 4 months of 1995) were examined. Articles or book chapters that were listed under more than one heading were counted under only one. During the period

studied, a total of 8500 listings were published in *Communication Abstracts*. The frequency of articles is listed below:

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Christianity			1	1		
Evangelicalism/Evangelicals		9		1		
Religion	4	4		5		1
Religious Broadcasting	3	9	2		2	
Religious Press	1		1			
Religious Television	1	1	1			
Religious Beliefs				1		
Religious Commitment						1
Religious Communication					1	
Televangelism/Televangelists		2		2		
Totals	**9**	**25**	**5**	**10**	**4**	**2**

A total of 56 listings appeared over the period studied, with 1991 appearing to be an unusually high year. However, examination of the listings revealed that 17 were chapters in two books indexed during 1991; thus, only 10 articles/books appeared on religious communication that year, making a total of 40 listings over the period studied. Further, only one listing appears for "mainstream" (i.e., SCA, ICA, or regional) journals in our field; it is a citation for Rothenbuler (1989) appearing in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, which analyzed the Olympics as an example of a secular religious festival.

While one might wish it were not the case, the number of listings in the *Journal of Communication and Religion* (formerly *Religious Communication Today*) fares little better. A handful of articles (12) over the entirety of its publication (17 years) actually deal with the practice of communication and how one's communication may be affected by religious commitment. (See selected bibliography at the end of this paper.)

By ignoring how religious commitment informs communication practices, our field conveys a message similar to that concluded by Skill et al. (1994) about the absence of religious issues in television programs. The authors found that religious affiliation and activity were portrayed less than 5.6% of the time across 1,462 characters observed in 100 program episodes during 1990. The infrequency with which religious affiliation and/or issues are address within fictional storylines symbolically argues that religion is not a very important factor in the lives of people portrayed. Such a message would appear to contradict the answers of those surveyed by the NSRI. Does our field truly believe that religious commitment is unimportant in the lives of those who believe? Does our field truly believe that such commitment has no effect on behavior? Or have we simply continued in a situation of not knowing how to measure such a thing as religious commitment in order to understand its effects on behavior? Perhaps the only message intended by those in our field is that religious commitment is not simply an issue being addressed by those conducting research.

What Are Some Demonstrated Effects of Religious Affiliation on Behavior?

Despite dismal numbers that suggest little interest in the subject, the research that has been conducted on religious commitment and its effect on behavior has revealed some interesting tendencies. Most notably, research has tended to demonstrate consistent effects for religious commitment or affiliation on behavior, suggesting a promising area of research. However, it is also interesting to note that the majority of these conclusions come from researchers outside the field of communication. Findings in this area include:

- People with similar religious attitudes form social networks that in turn support various levels of activism with respect to social issues. (Hall, 1993)
- A person with a "quest" orientation to religion (desire to ask questions, rejecting simple answers, and willingness to embrace new ideas) report a susceptibility to religious persuasion not shared by people with extrinsic or intrinsic orientations to religion. (Baesler, 1994)
- The higher one's religious commitment, the greater the likelihood of disclosing personal information. (Ragsdale, 1994)
- One's view of God is related to psychological adjustment. (Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991)
- A view of God as benevolent is negatively correlated with loneliness, while a view of God as wrathful is positively correlated with loneliness. (Schwab & Petersen, 1990)
- Conservative Christians are more likely to attribute the cause of everyday events to God (when positive) and Satan (when negative) than those who are less religious. (Lupfer, et al., 1992)
- While conservative Protestants are more likely than others to value obedience in children, they are no less likely to value intellectual autonomy in children. (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993)
- Christian Right activists, in opposition to the Christian Left, are much less likely to see environmental issues as important, or to support the adoption of policies that might costs jobs or result in inflation. (Guth, et al., 1993); Biblical literalists are also less likely to see the environment as an important issue (Greeley, 1993).
- Religion is a significant predictor of television viewing habits, even after controlling for sex, age, and social class. (Hamilton & Rubin, 1992; Francis & Gibson, 1993)
- Heavy viewers of religious television are more likely to vote. (Hoover, 1990).

This is not an exhaustive review, but a representative one. However, it would suggest that one's religious affiliation and/or commitment can be expected to exert some effect on the way one thinks and behaves toward issues that activate

cognitions about one's religion. Why should this be important to researchers in the area of communication?

Religious Commitment as a Variable of Interest in Communication

The difficulty in studying religious commitment and its effect on communication processes begins with the problem of defining and measuring it. What should be used as a measure of religious commitment? I suggest that such a measure might take into account a person's:

1. Affiliation with a particular religious denomination, including
   a. frequency of one's attendance at religious services;
   b. length of membership in the denomination attended;
   c. knowledge of and commitment to particular doctrines of the church attended;
   d. practice of other church-related habits, such as membership in a support group, level of financial support for the church one attends as well as parachurch organizations, and attendance at special church-related events (e.g., retreats, seminars, etc.);
   e. extent to which social networks overlap with church membership.

2. Concepts one has of God, including
   a. ideas concerning the benevolence or wrath of God;
   b. ideas concerning pre-destination or free will;
   c. ideas concerning the obligations of a "believer" (e.g., prayer, study, etc.)

3. Concepts one has concerning the behavioral injunctions required by one's religious affiliation, including
   a. attitudes toward sexuality;
   b. attitudes toward families, marriage, and divorce;
   c. attitudes concerning personal habits such as alcohol and tobacco use.

4. The complexity or density of religious beliefs, including
   a. how central such beliefs are to one's self-concept;
   b. how open one is to changing religious beliefs;
   c. how open one is to defending beliefs.

A second issue concerns the question of effect of religious commitment on communication behavior. Where might we be likely to find relationships? I will suggest three areas:

1. Persuasion behavior
   a. Receptivity to public persuasive messages will be affected by one's religious commitment, particularly where that commitment is to conservative, evangelical or fundamentalist churches that take particular political positions. For example, if one's minister regularly villifies President Clinton, it is likely for that person to have difficulty agreeing with public statements made by Clinton.
   b. Receptivity to interpersonal persuasive messages will be affected by one's openness to defending beliefs. For example, some people in my church simply

tell callers who are Jehovah's Witnesses or LDS missionaries to go away without discussing religion at all. Others invite them in, and try to persuade the callers to come to our church.

2. Self-disclosure
   a. Particular topics will be too risky to approach very often, whereas others will form the central topoi for particular groups. For example, a person in a religious environment that villifies homosexuality will be unlikely to express support for homosexuals as a group.
   b. Patterns of self-disclosure will be affected by one's religious commitment. For example, evangelical churches often celebrate the "saved sinner." A person can confess to heinous sins in the past as long as the error of his or her ways has been seen and as long as that person repudiates those sins as harmful and destructive.
3. Narrative
   Going beyond particular instances of self-disclosure, the way one creates a "life story" and fits that life story within the larger context of group membership and group story will be affected by religious commitment and affiliation. Religious commitment affects what one may count as significant in one's story, what one may count as evidence, what one may use as warrants, and so on.

These suggestions are certainly not exhaustive. The waning "quantoid" in me can conceive of a variety of ways a measure of religious commitment might be manipulated to find relationships with communication variables such as compliance-gaining strategies, "talkaholic" tendencies, and communication competence. Such research might prove interesting. I am more interested in the quality of talk and the presence of others who share similar religious beliefs makes a different kind of interaction possible than when religiously committed people interact with others who do not have similar beliefs. My interest arises primarily from a "hunch," shared by others at my university, that the way we talk (i.e., the topics we talk about, the arguments that we use, the things that count as evidence) changes when we move out of this environment into others where people do not embrace the same life-directing beliefs that we do.

Pearce (1989) has described some of these processes in identifying monocultural and ethnocentric communication. In some ways, moving out of a field in which religious argumentation is possible, into one where it is viewed with suspicion, is akin to engaging in cross-cultural communication. My interest in the effect of religious commitment on communication behavior is a desire to move beyond my "hunches" in order to more systematically ask questions and test hypotheses. Toward that end, I have begun to explore in my own research how religious commitment to evangelicalism affects one's communication (Lulofs, 1994). While I would not dictate what others would do, I would invite them to question the axiological assumptions of their research, to consider how other value assumptions drive behavior, and not to think people like me as "too scary."

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